

Change of Heart

by ScribLL

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Summary: An old friend makes Aeryn an offer.

## 1. Reunion

Change of Heart (Part 1) \*\*

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Author: ScribLL@houston.rr.com

Part: 1/5

Rating: G

Summary: An old friend makes Aeryn an offer, set about a month after 'A Bug's Life'.. Minor spoilers for AHR, ABL.

Disclaimer: I don't own anything about Farscape. All characters, except the few I created, belong to Henson studios and the SciFi Channel.

Author's notes: I wrote the first draft in the long hiatus after ABL so this story diverges from canon at this point in that Aeryn recovered on her own and Crais is still captain of his command carrier. '::::(dialogue):::' indicates transmitted voice.

With many, many thanks to Kat for her encouragement, invaluable advice and for reeling me back in when I get over my head.

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Reunion

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Aeryn Sun took one wary step into the bar and paused, momentarily blinded by the transition from bright sunlight to the poorly lit interior. As she let her eyes adjust the sounds and smells of the place became its opening introduction. Low conversations sprinkled here and there with nervous laughter, the smell of stale alcohol, the musk-scent of alien bodies and other odors she'd rather not identify all registered in a moment. The bar was much like others that she had seen throughout her travels in the uncharted territories, rather seedy, attending to the less virtuous needs of the many species in an uncivilized sector of space.

She searched the faces, looking for someone in particular, someone she believed that she would never willingly search out again. She took her time, careful to watch her back, too. The first thing she felt were his eyes pinned on her. With a radar-like precision she turned, zeroing in on the occupant of a table at the back of the room. Their eyes locked and the familiarity of his face was unexpectedly comforting.

Still, she approached him cautiously. She was taking a terrible risk to come here, but, in the end, curiosity and more than just a twinge of hope had pushed her on.

He rose slowly, keeping his hands where she could see them. His deliberate movements hinted at restrained power; his dark, deep-set eyes never left hers. He was wearing a long overcoat that parted briefly as he stood and she glimpsed his concealed Pleisar regiment uniform underneath.

He smiled thinly at her and when she was close enough to hear him without the need for him to raise his voice, he greeted her simply, "Aeryn."

"Paulto," she answered. She, too, was careful to make no sudden moves. She removed the portable scanner from her belt and he spread his arms in tacit consent. Down one side and then the other, she waved the scanning wand over his limbs and torso. As in most bars in this sector, the patrons made a point of minding their own business and registered no notice of this. Just another day in the uncharted territories.

"No weapons. No tracers," he assured her.

"You won't mind if I check then," she said as she continued. The scan turned up nothing, and he gestured for her to sit.

"Can I buy you a drink? The quanjon here is barely passable, but it's better than I expected."

Aeryn nodded as she sat and Paulto motioned to the waiter. Two mugs of the amber liquid were placed in front of them almost immediately.

"I'm glad you finally made it. This is the fourth time I've waited for you here and this place lost its charm on the first visit."

"Sorry, I kept you," she said flatly. She raised her mug, nodding to

him in salute, and tasted the smoky liquid. The brew was too raw, and she tried in vain to suppress a shudder as the muscles in her throat constricted in protest.

He grinned, chuckling in the back of his throat. "Ahh, how I've missed you, Aeryn. It gets much better towards the bottom of the mug, I promise."

Aeryn pushed the mug away. "You've gone to a lot of trouble to get me here. You certainly didn't invite me here just for a drink. What do you want?"

"It wasn't easy changing the encoded message in the wanted beacon without the good captain finding out."

"Soâ€|this has nothing to do with Crais?"

"Not in the way you might think." He took a long draught of the quanjon, his eyes never leaving hers.

"I'm listening."

"The vendetta that Crais has against this 'Crichton' is insane. It goes beyond all reason. A quarter cycle ago, I found out that the Council at First Command had ordered him to abandon the search for the Leviathan and return to base."

"But we're still finding active beacons."

"Yes. The orders have never been mentioned and the only other officer that would have known about them mysteriously disappeared."

"Crais deliberately disobeyed the Council?" Aeryn eyes narrowed.  
"Just how do you know this?"

"After all the cycles we served together, you don't trust me?"

"Ancient history."

"I don't believe that. We were crib-mates. We've known each other our whole lives...trained together...our lives depended on each other."

"And I let you down," she reminded him.

He gave a slight shrug. "True, we're all being punished for your defection."

Aeryn raised her chin in defiance at the accusation, but she held her tongue.

Paulto leaned towards her, brow furrowed, his eyes narrow and focused. Aeryn had seen this look before. It was the same expression he'd held at the beginning of sparring exercises. He had been a master at sizing up his opponent.

"Why did you do it?" he asked.

"I had no choice. Crais condemned me to death for the mere suggestion

that his brother's death was just an accident."

"I know that. But whatever possessed you to defend the Human in the first place? What was he to you?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. But it was an accident. Crichton's ship was caught in a wormhole that tossed him out right in the middle of everything. In that retrograde ship of his, he couldn't avoid Tauvo. He's from a backward race on the other side of the universe. He knew nothing about Peacekeepers or escaped criminals. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"He chose sides quickly enough."

"He wasn't given much of a choice," she paused, tilting her head towards him a little. "Neither was I."

Paulto seemed to be weighing her answers. She shook off the need to have him understand what happened; it really made no difference.  
"What is this all about anyway?"

"As I said, I found out about the message from First Command. One of the techs in the unit I've been assigned to was called to do some repairs in the captain's ready room and she found a damaged message chip. I persuaded her into trying to retrieve the message and she managed to get most of it. They were Crais's orders from the Council. It took some doing, but my friend managed to hide a message to First Command in a carrier signal. If Crais ever finds out, his second may not be the only officer that disappears without a trace. But to the point, I've been authorized to make you an offer. From the Council." He leaned closer to her. "Would you like to come back? Your commission restored? This offer, it's genuine."

Aeryn sneered. "Do you take me for a fool? Remember, I've been irreversibly contaminated."

"That could be overlooked. Especially if you proved your loyalty."

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Of course. A crooked smile played at the corner of her mouth. "You want me to turn them in."

"First Command is very unhappy with Crais for disobeying orders. Using a command carrier to search for a few escaped criminals is a gross misuse of resources. The Batari rebellion has escalated and spread into the neighboring system. The carrier that Crais commands is needed there and the resources to hunt him down are unavailable. So, the Council is willing to make a few concessions. You will be pardoned and your full rank and commission restoredâ€"you'll be welcomed back to active duty in your old unit. The entire unit's rank will also be restored. This whole episode will disappear, as if it never happened. All you have to do is give us Crichton."

"Give you Crichton?"

"The Council's only interest in Crichton is that Crais is looking for him. A ship from First Command was dispatched a week ago, as soon as my message with our coordinates was received. It should arrive in

this sector in two solar days. It picks up Crichton, takes him to First Command. If the Council has Crichton, Crais will have no reason to remain in the uncharted territories. Once he returns to Peacekeeper territory, they'll deal with him."

"A ship couldn't get from First Command to way out here in only a weeken."

"It's a new ship with a new type of drive. Heavy shielding. Minimum weaponry. Built for speedâ€"very fast."

"And what happens to Crichton?"

There was that look again, as if he stared at her face long enough, he would be able to read her mind. "He'll be kept in protective custody until Crais's return. Then he'll be free to go. Think of it this wayâ€"you'd be doing him a favor."

"A favor. And just how do you figure that?"

"He'd no longer be a hunted man. Let's face it, so far he's been very lucky. Without you, he would have never had a chance against Crais. But how long do you really think his luck will hold out?"

Aeryn frowned. Paulto had struck a deep nerve. If she was honest with herself, she had to admit she'd thought they would have all been dead a long time ago. "And the others?"

"They're escaped criminals."

"They've saved my hide on more than one occasion."

"I see." Paulto took a slow sip of quanjon and placed the mug carefully back down on the table. "I can understand your reluctance to betray a comrade, but they are criminals."

"You've wasted your time, Paulto." She pushed back her chair to go.

"Wait! Let's look at this from a practical point of view."

She hesitated, then leaned back in her chair again. She'd come this far, she might as well hear him out.

"This ship from First Commandâ€"it's not a warship. They're not going to be in any position to take a Leviathan on, even if she doesn't have any weapons. Once you get Crichton off the Leviathan, your friends can starburst out of here. This ship is certainly not going to follow them. The objective is Crais's carrier. They want to get Crichton back to their base as soon as possible. Retrieval of the criminals is secondary. They won't risk the primary mission for a secondary target they are unlikely to succeed at."

Aeryn had to agree his argument was sound. Moya and the others would likely have no trouble escaping.

"They'd still be wanted," he continued, "but Crais wouldn't be breathing down their necks. And it could be a long while before a Peacekeeper force comes to the uncharteds looking for them again." He paused. "Think about it, Aeryn. There's still a few days until the

ship arrives."

She rose slowly, nodding. "All right, I'll think about it."

"What's your hurry? Why don't you finish your quanjon, or, at least, keep me company while I finish mine?" Paulto took another sip from his mug.

Aeryn tried to sense the trap, but could only make out the sincere and distantly familiar welcome from an old friend and she found it warmed her considerably. She sat back down and relaxed a bit for the first time since she had entered the bar. "All right." She took a careful sip from her mug. The liquid was still raw, but not as bad, now that she expected it. "How did you get away from Crais without detection?"

"It's too easy. Crais is still sending out as many patrols as possible looking for your friend. We've been spreading ourselves extremely thin. The ships in a patrol are often out of contact with one another. It's a simple matter for a prowler to slip off for a few arns."

Alarmed, she rose. "Then the carrier is close?"

He grabbed her by the wrist and held her. "Not that close. Don't worry."

Aeryn's eyes narrowed. "How do I know that this isn't a trick, a diversion, while Crais goes after Moya?"

Paulto released her hand, but held her eyes. "I give you my word, on my honor as a Peacekeeper and as your friend."

Aeryn searched his face for any kind of deception. The Paulto Jetaal she had known would not have given such an oath lightly, but it had been a long time. She was certainly not the same. Was he?

"This is a dangerous game you're playing, Paulto."

"I never let that stop me before," he smiled at her, "especially not with Aeryn Sun on my wing."

"This isn't exactly like picking off Hockring Stingers."

He grinned at her reference to the long ago sortie. "They've got eyes in the back of their heads. Tell me that wasn't frelling dangerous."

Aeryn remembered very well. "So you were the eyes in the back of my head."

"And you were mine."

Aeryn took another sip of the quanjon. She found the taste had become friendlier, even familiar. Maybe she could trust him after all.

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Crichton and Rygel watched Aeryn's prowler land from the maintenance bay then went out to meet her. John stuck his hand out to help her down from the cockpit. It was his Southern upbringing, the continual drill of gentlemanly manners throughout his childhood, John couldn't help it even though he knew better—"she always ignored the helping hand he offered. This time was no different except for the disdaining glance she gave his hand before he dropped it back to his side.

"'Bout time you showed up," he said. "I was about to head up a search party. You need any help unloading?"

"More importantly, did you find anything interesting to eat?" Rygel asked.

She brushed past them going to the rear of the prowler and opened the doors to its very limited cargo hold. "I picked up a few things."

John walked up behind her looking over her shoulder. The cargo hold was nearly empty, containing only two small crates. "This is it? What have you doing down there all this time?"

She gave him one of her patented 'don't cross me now, Human' looks and said, "Negotiating." She lifted one of the crates out of the cargo hold. John had to dodge out of her way as she turned and marched toward the corridor.

He picked up the other crate and followed after her.  
"Negotiating?"

"Yes," she answered, not turning to look at him. After a few moments she added, "I may need to go back in a couple of days."

Rygel had been following them in his levitating chair as they made their way to the center chamber. "Perhaps you could use my expertise?" he offered.

"No," she said. "I can handle it."

"Back off, Sparky," warned John. Something had made Aeryn edgy, not that it seemed to take much. However, he'd just as soon stay on her good side.

But that was just another plan that backfired; she turned on him. "I \_don't\_ need your help either."

"What did I say?"

"Just leave me alone!" She slammed the crate down on the table and stormed out.

John watched her backside as she stomped off. "What bug got up her butt?" He shook his head and began to help Rygel unload the crates.

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Aeryn retreated to the relative privacy of her quarters, if there was such a thing as privacy aboard Moya. She began to pace; the turmoil in her mind expressing itself as barely contained nervous energy. The ache in her head, a parting gift from the quanjon, only fed her irritation.

She was a soldier, a warrior born and bred, a force for order in the universe, and it hadn't taken a chat with Paulto to remind her where she belonged. But here on Moya, what had she been reduced to? An outlaw, a tech, and worse--a common peddler.

And living in a converted prison cell. She spun around, in a glance taking in her surroundings, her 'home' in exile--and tripped on the corner of her bed. The frayed reins that held her rawest emotions in check snapped and she lashed out. She lifted the mattress awkwardly and threw it, in the process hitting the bedside table. The table and everything on it fell to the floor with a satisfying crash. A chest followed, then a chair, smashed against the web of bars. She threw herself into her rampage, overturning shelves and cabinets, kicking their contents across the room, and when nothing else remained, attacking the very walls themselves.

When her impotent rage finally dissipated, she was sitting on the floor in the wreckage of her room cradling torn hands.

She and Paulto had spent the last two arns reminiscing about old battles they had fought together, their former easy camaraderie reawakening. Paulto was again her brother-in-arms and she found herself reliving the excitement of each engagement--the jazzed anticipation of each mission, the thrill of the chase, the aggressive reflex reaction to danger, the honed killer instinct. She was a warrior among warriors and this was the life she was bred and trained to live.

The time had flown by too quickly. She was disappointed when Paulto said he had best get back before a patrol was sent out to look for him. It was like wakening from a wonderful dream and wanting desperately to fall asleep again. She hardly remembered getting in her prowler and the trip back to Moya.

She had believed that she could never go back to her old life and had resigned herself to make the best of what circumstance had handed her.

But now here it was, dangled before her, so close she could taste it, as sweet as the last sip of quanjon. Did she really dare believe she could go back?

She looked down at the raw skin on the back of her hands. The blood had begun to dry. She made a fist, breaking open the wound again. Fresh blood appeared, reminding her again of why she lost control.

When she had returned to Moya, Crichton was standing in the transport bay, waiting for her, her dream collapsing by his very existence. She had felt bitter resentment rise on seeing his smiling face, blissfully unaware, asking, of all things, to help her. No matter that it was not his fault--she had said as much to Paulto earlier--but the fact remained that she was here because of him and

would stay here because of him.

Ahh, but that was the compelling irony, wasn't it? She didn't have to stay here because of him—he \_was\_ her way home. She began to laugh bitterly at the cruel, cruel joke, but it only made her head hurt more.

Her head hurt, her hands hurt, but the physical pain paled in comparison to her disappointment. It was easiest to lay the blame on the quanjon. She was so tired. She just wanted Paulto and Crichton to get out of her head, go away, and leave her alone for awhile. It seemed a great effort, but she dragged the mattress back onto the bed, then lay down, clothes and all. In moments she was oblivious.

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John and Zhaan peered through the door into Aeryn's quarters. Pilot had been made aware of her rampage courtesy of one of the DRD's and had contacted them both. They had watched most of it through one of Moya's monitors. John had wanted to try and stop her, but Zhaan suggested that it would be better to wait and let it play itself out. When Aeryn finally lay down on her bed, John insisted that they check on her.

Zhaan whispered to him, "I'm sure she's just asleep."

John watched the steady rise and fall of Aeryn's chest, but would have found it more comforting if she hadn't been laying in the remains of her own personal battlefield. "What do you think got into her? Do Sebaceans go through 'hyper-rage'?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Let's just keep an eye on her the next few days. Don't push her though, John. You don't want to inadvertently start another episode."

John looked back at Aeryn, worry etching deep lines in his forehead. Zhaan patted him on the shoulder. "I'm sure she'll be all right, John." She turned and walked away.

Reluctantly, John followed her.

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## 2. Decisions

> <meta name="Generator"> The Proposal (2) \*\*

Change of Heart (Part 2)

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Author: Brenda, ScribLL@houston.rr.com

Part: 2/5

Rating: PG-13

Summary: Aeryn must choose between her old life and Crichton. This is set about a month after 'A Bug's Life', Aeryn got better all on her

own and Crais is still captain of his command carrier. I wrote the first draft in the long hiatus after ABL. Any similarities between this work and subsequent episodes were a frelling surprise to me.

Disclaimer: I don't own anything about Farscape. All characters, except the few I created, belong to Henson studios and the SciFi Channel.

With many, many thanks to Kat for her encouragement, advice, and for reeling me back in when I get over my head.

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## Decisions

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Aeryn woke up many arns later to the soft hum that was Moya. The sight that first greeted her eyes startled her adding that to the discovery that she was still wearing her boots, let alone her clothes. Then she closed her eyes in remembrance. She knew better than to drink quanjon, but somehow Paulto always seemed to talk her into it.

She opened her eyes wide again. Paulto...

She sat up quickly, the rest of the memory at once crystal clear. She looked around the wreckage of her room and then at the dried blood on the back of her hands. She fell back on the bed and moaned. It hadn't been a dream.

"Would like to come back? Your commission restored? Rejoin your unit? The offer is genuine." His proposal echoed in her memory.

"No," she said aloud. She pushed it from her mind.

She got up and made her way to her private alcove, her boots making soft crunching noises in the broken rubble. She stripped off her clothes and boots and stepped into the shower. She stood there for a long time, letting the water run down over her face and hair and down over her hands, washing the traces of her blood away, but realizing that the memory of her meeting with Paulto would not wash away as easily.

It had been easy to imagine that nothing had changed, that she was still Officer Aeryn Sun of the Pleisar's Regiment, that she was still with her unit and Paulto, waiting for news of their promotion to the marauder commando unit. Easy to imagine that everything was just as it should be.

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"Would you like to come back?"

Would she like to go back to the life that she had been bred and trained for? That had been all she knew? Back to the life she had once loved so well?

She turned off the water and stood there, dripping wet, mindless of the chill.

"\_Would you like to come back\_?"

The answer whispered to her, \_yessss\_.

"\_All you have to do is give us Crichton\_."

Yes, that was all she had to do.

Her cold detachment surprised her; it was as if she were making a list. Things to Do Today: Take a shower, clean your quarters, pick up supplies on the planet, turn Crichton over to the Peacekeepers. Just another day's work.

She was nearly dry when she at last stepped out of the shower bay. She searched and found some gauze in a medic kit and she carefully wrapped her hands. Her stomach growled reminding her that she hadn't eaten since early the previous day. She dressed and left the remains of her room.

John was eating alone in the center chamber when she arrived. She nearly turned around and left, but it seemed an act of cowardice to avoid him. She collected a few food cubes on a plate and a cup of water and sat down at the other end of the table, keeping her eyes on her plate. Several silent minutes passed as they ate. As she knew he would, John finally spoke, "Are your hands alright?"

She looked up at him for the first time, the concern written all over his face. Such an expressive face, she thought, not for the first time. "They'll be fine."

Several more moments passed. She could tell he wanted to say something more, but she wasn't going to make it easy for him; John was the last person she wanted to talk to. But he was persistent, if anything.

"Would you like some help cleaning up your quarters?"

Of course he knew. "No, I'll take care of it."

She was not going to give him another chance. Finishing her last food cube, she rose from the table, then strode towards the door, but a twinge of guilt made her hesitate as she neared the exit. Over her shoulder she said, "I'm sorry."

"For what?" he asked, surprised.

"About yesterday." She left before he could say another word.

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The prowler required a certain amount of routine maintenance—tech work, but without techs, she had only herself to rely on. She busied herself checking fuel and fluid levels, containment systems, critical relay circuits, and cleaning out the plasma jets. She also needed to check out the environmental controls. The cockpit had recently been getting a little too warm for her comfort. Grudgingly, she had had to

admit sometime ago, that if she didn't actually enjoy it, she did derive a great deal of satisfaction from working on the prowler herself. Wouldn't Paulto be surprised to see her now?

She wondered if Paulto knew the dilemma that he had handed her. No, for him there could be no other choice she could possibly make. He had always been so sure of himself. And of her. But he didn't know John.

She owed John. He had saved her from the Peacekeepers, the Living Death, Namtar. He'd selflessly risked his own life for them all too many times, even when it made no sense to do so. He deserved her loyalty, if nothing else, but there was something else. Something that made her feel vulnerable. Something she tried not to examine too closely.

And then there was the obvious physical attraction. Such physical needs had been easily met when she had been a Peacekeeper, but she knew somehow the rules had changed and she just wasn't ready for all the other complications that would arise from such a relationship. Perhaps that was why her closest encounters with John had occurred when she had thought that they were about to die. No complicated future to worry about there.

Of course, in the end, there would be no future with him anyway. He would figure out how to make a stable wormhole and he would go home. He came close once; it was just a matter of time. She'd been given a fine preview of what it would be like on his planet. She could never go back to his home with him, even if she wanted to.

Eventually the others would find their way home, too. She had no idea what she would do then. She had never been alone, always one of many. The idea secretly terrified her.

This could be her one chance for the only future she had ever imagined.

All she had to do was give them John.

Aeryn leaned her forehead against the cool metal of the prowler's hull and sighed.

"Are you feeling alright?"

Aeryn jumped at the sudden sound of John's voice behind her and she bumped her head hard on one of the prowler's fins. "Ugh! Frelling dren, Crichton! Don't sneak up on me!"

"Sorry, I didn't think I was that quiet."

She rubbed the bump on her head, angrier with herself than John. She tried to suppress her irritation. "What do you want?"

"I came to see if you were still having trouble with the environmentalists...see if you needed any help with them."

She had forgotten that she had mentioned this problem to him a couple of days ago. Normally, she would have appreciated his help, but just now his presence would only exacerbate her guilty conscience. "I can handle it myself," she said attempting to dismiss him, but before she

finished, he had pulled off the access panel to the environmental controls and was peering inside. She walked up beside him saying more insistently, "I \_said\_â€"I could handle it."

John was shaking his head and making little 'tsking' noises. "Lookie here. This relay is nearly fried. You're lucky it hasn't gone completely. There must be a power overload somewhere." He looked back up at her. "It'll go a lot faster if we trace it out together."

Frelling dren, she thought to herself, but he was right. She didn't know how long it might take to go through all the circuitry by herself. And if there were Peacekeepers anywhere in range, she needed to have the prowler in good working order as quickly as possible. She sighed resignedly. "Alright." They went to work.

It took the better part of an arn to trace out the problem and another two to repair it. Gratefully, John had kept the superfluous conversation he seemed to love so much to a minimum. She tried to keep her mind on the task at hand, but her mind continually wandered back to Johnâ€"not surprising really, with him hovering nearby.

If she turned him over to the Peacekeepers, what would happen to him? Paulto's story about First Command wanting him to lure Crais and his cruiser back to Peacekeeper territories was plausible. She had no illusions about what 'protective custody' meant; he would be locked up. After that, would they really let him go? She doubted that seriously. Even if they did, he would be stranded in Peacekeeper territories with no way back to Moya and Farscape One and his chances of ever finding his home would go from small to none. She would be back with her unit and would have no way to protect him. No, she had no illusions about what would happen to John if she turned him in.

When they were on the fake Earth, John had turned against his own kind for her sake. No matter that it had all been an illusion, at the time, John believed that it was real. He had not hesitated to forsake his future for her. How could she possibly betray such loyalty?

She valued loyalty; it had been instilled into her by the Peacekeepers, but in the end that loyalty had not been returned and they turned on her. Out of necessity her allegiance had changed to Moya and her crew. She had never believed that loyalty could be such a transient sentiment, but here she was, considering to change her allegiance again, simply because it suited her goals.\_.

"Aeryn, are you here today?" John broke through her reverie.

"What?"

"That's the third time I called you. I finished connecting the power supply. Why don't you fire her up for a test?"

On the other hand, sometimes he could just be annoying. Maybe the Peacekeepers would take him away before he badgered her to death, she thought as she climbed into the cockpit. She turned on the main power supply and then switched the environmental controls on. Immediately there was a loud crackle from the access panel that John had been working at. He fell to the deck backwards and didn't move.

Icy fear cut through her. "John!" Aeryn cried as she leaped from the cockpit to the deck floor and rushed to his side. "Johnâ€|John," she repeated his name. She shook him by the shoulders without any response. Fighting her rising panic, she leaned down to feel for a pulse at his neck.

At once arms grabbed her and pulled her down on top of him. She pushed herself back in surprise to see John laughing at her. "I just wanted to see if you were paying attention."

She turned away from him pulling her knees to her chest as relief and anger both fought for control. She was furious; he had manipulated her with this childish prank, and worse, she had let him. But at the same time she realized that she cared for him far more than she had been willing to admit. She had been terrified that he had been hurt, or worse, dead. Whatever made her think for even a moment that she could betray him?

"Aeryn? I'm sorry. It was a stupid joke."

His hand on her back was warm and against her will, calming. She had to remind herself she was angry with him. Spinning around, she launched herself at him, pushing him back to the floor. She pinned him beneath her, staring at him eye to eye.

He made no attempt to struggle, just stared back at her expectantly, willing to accept any punishment she offered. As quickly as it rose, her anger drained away, replaced by...something else.

She became aware of the sensation of warmth where she touched him and the small movement of his chest against her with each breath he took. Her own reflection in the dark pupils of his eyes drew her ever closer until she felt the warmth of his breath on her face. His nostrils flared minutely with each breath, his lips slightly parted. The desire to feel them against her own seemed natural and she leaned down until her lips momentarily brushed against his. They were soft and warm, inviting. She leaned down again, but this time he met her halfway. His arms went round her again, but this time they drew her to him gently and she relaxed against him. He buried one hand in the hair at the back of her head, holding her to him. His tongue parted her lips and she tasted faint traces of cantala tea. The swish of blood in her ears was so loud; he had to hear it too.

"I am sorry to interrupt, but something is happening in Command that you both should hear."

Aeryn and John parted abruptly at the sound of Zhaan's voice directly at their side. Aeryn was momentarily confused as if she had been instantly ripped from one place and dropped into another.

"I'm sorry, I tried to make some noise when I came in, but you were...preoccupied. Pilot notified me of an incoming transmission. He informed me that you were here making 'repairs'. I was nearby, so I just stopped in."

Aeryn stared blankly at Zhaan, but John mumbled nervously, "Well, we wereâ€"'aah'â€", he looked back at Aeryn and shrugged, sighing.

Zhaan raised her hand, nodding her head. "No need to explain, John. I'll let you compose yourselves and meet you in Command in a few moments." She turned to leave, then hesitated and turned back to them smiling softly. "It was only a matter of time before you discovered the pleasure of each other's company. I'm very happy for you." This time she quickly walked out.

Aeryn rose to her feet and attempted to straighten her hair by combing it with her fingers, then gave up and tied it back, not that she cared that much about her hair, but it gave her an excuse to avoid looking at John. She was only mildly embarrassed that Zhaan had found them this way; she was more disturbed by her own behavior. Her instinct was to flee and Zhaan had been kind enough to give her a destination.

She made straight for the corridor, but could not avoid John's interception. He held her firmly by the arm.

"Aeryn, can we talk about what just happened here?"

She registered the disappointment on his face, but she didn't care. She looked coldly down at his hand on her arm. "You talk too much, Crichton."

He released her and she strode off to Command without looking back.

\*\*\*

D'Argo and Rygel were already with Zhaan when Aeryn arrived in Command with John close behind. If Zhaan had shared what she had seen, the others gave no indication of it. The image of a rather thin anthropoid alien with bushy orange eyebrows that appeared to crawl across his forehead appeared on the forward screen. Rygel seemed to be concluding negotiations with the alien.

-

"He arrives in 20 arns. I'm sure he would be very interested in meeting your representatives soon after he arrives."

-

"Here they are now," said Rygel. He turned to Aeryn and John. "Step up to the transmitter so he can see you." They glanced at each other in curiosity, but complied with the request.

-

"They're perfect. Prator Delmar will never know the difference. Remember, Dominar, I expect my fee promptly, as soon as the negotiations are completed."

-

"We have final approval of the product," Rygel added.

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"Of course, but you won't be disappointed. I am transmitting the

coordinates of the meeting place to you now. Until tomorrow. End transmission."

—

Rygel was looking quite pleased with himself, but the D'Argo and Zhaan were also smiling. "What's this all about?" asked John.

"There is wonderful news, John," said Zhaan. "Rygel may have found a way for us to acquire zed level map fibers depicting a vast extent of the uncharted territories, however, it will require some subterfuge on your part."

"What are 'zed level' map fibers?" asked John.

Aeryn answered him. "'Zed level' is a Peacekeeper designation for a wide-grid preliminary survey."

"You mean, star chartsâ€"maps?"

"Yes," D'Argo said ominously. "It appears that Peacekeeper Command is preparing for a larger presence in the uncharted territories."

— —

"Zed level surveys are by no means complete, but it much more than we have at the moment," added Zhaan. It was clear the prospect excited her.

"I'm curious as to how these people obtained the fibers," said Aeryn. "Peacekeepers would never sell or barter such valuable information."

Rygel floated closer to her. "Well, you'll get the opportunity to ask him yourself."

"If these fibers are so rare and valuable, what are we trading for them?" asked John.

Rygel smiled smugly. "Our supply of Glitany distillate"

John turned incredulous. "Someone's going to give these maps to us for six crates of a something that smells like it was squeezed from three day old sweat socks?"

"It's a favorite on the planet," said Rygel defensively.

"What's the catch?" asked John.

"And what did you mean by 'subterfuge'?" added Aeryn eyeing Zhaan suspiciously.

"The Glitany distillate is for our informant, Keegan," explained Rygel. "He is arranging the meeting with the current owner of the map fibers, Prator Delmar, a minor officiate on the neighboring planet. He wants to return them to the Peacekeepers in exchange for their 'support' in the next election."

"Peacekeeper help. There's an oxymoron," said John. "Is the man delusional?"

"Quite possibly," agreed Rygel. "So all you and Aeryn have to do is put on your Peacekeeper disguises, visit this Prator fellow, promise him the Peacekeepers' undying support, and solemnly accept his humble offering."

"I don't like it," said Aeryn. "The last time we tried this, it ended up a disaster."

John bristled at the implied accusation. "It would have worked if that intel-virus hadn't gotten loose. We can pull this off."

Aeryn began to pace as she grudgingly considered the scheme. It wasn't like they were trying to fool real Peacekeepers' this Prator Delmar probably would never know the difference. And they wouldn't be on Moya having to explain a Luxan, Delvian, and Hynerian on board. She hated to admit it but the idea had possibilities. And map fibers would be an invaluable tool, one they could hardly afford to pass up.

Still, this meeting was just a few arns before that ship from First Command was due. She silently cursed the weakness that had led her to meet with Paulto. Because of her, Paulto knew exactly where to find Moya. If he hadn't already told Crais about them, he would doubtless inform the ship from First Command. They should have already starburst out of this sector, but she didn't care to explain this to her shipmates, and especially not to John.

John held her arm to halt her pacing. "It'll be easy," he said persuasively. "We go down to the planet, do our James Bond and Mati Hari act and at any sign of trouble we blast the frell out of Dodge."

"I don't like waiting here this long. We found that last wanted beacon four days ago." D'Argo fingered the hilt of his Qualta blade, its ready presence reassuring. "Still, if we can obtain these fibers, it would be worth the risk of waiting another day."

If Aeryn shared the fact that she had already seen a Peacekeeper, D'Argo might not think it was worth the wait, but she kept that to herself. "Alright," said Aeryn. "But I agree with D'Argo. Moya should be ready to starburst out of here the moment John and I return, whether we have the fibers or not."

They would be cutting it very close, and that worried her. "Come on," she said to John over her shoulder as she headed towards the corridor. "We'd better finish the repairs on the prowler. We need to present ourselves in a Peacekeeper ship. Moya's transport will never do."

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The remaining repairs took very little time to complete. Aeryn's coldness seemed to be thawing some. He was fairly used to her running hot and cold by now, although he wished the 'hot' spells weren't quite so brief. At this point, though, he would settle for warm and the conversation at least seemed to be heading that way.

"Who were Jamzbun and Matari?" Aeryn asked over the hull of the prowler. They were in the process of replacing the access panels.

John smiled into the panel he was working on, amused by her mispronunciation. "James Bond and Mata Hari. They were spies."

"Did they work together?"

John shook his head. "No. James Bond was a fictional character in a long series of movies." He had explained movies to her before. "He did heroic feats against impossible odds, saving the free world single-handedly and always got the girl."

"Oh, a male fantasy."

John smiled. "Yeah, I guess so."

"And Mata Hari?"

"She was real enough, although quite a bit before my time. She stole secrets for the bad guys though."

"So I take it, in your comparison, you are James Bond and I am Mata Hari."

"Yeah," John said as he finished securing his panel. He walked up behind Aeryn to see if she needed help with hers.

"So why am I the 'bad guy'?" she asked as she snapped the last panel into place.

He placed his hands against the prowler's hull on either side of her shoulders, yet barely touching her, speaking low and suggestively into her ear. "Because she was smart... and sexy... and men found her irresistible." He could almost feel the softness of her hair against his face.

She stood very still, not that he had given her much room to move in. "What happened to her?"

"She wasâ€œ", he stopped short realizing that this was not where he wanted the conversation to go. "I forgot."

She spun around to face him. "She was what?"

John lowered his arms and stepped back, shaking his head, the mood broken. "It was a bad choice, Aeryn."

"What happened to her?" she insisted.

He sighed and answered reluctantly, "She was executed for treason."

She just stood there and looked at him, her dark eyes intense for the longest moment, then she bolted out of the maintenance bay.

John leaned back against the prowler, slowly exhaling the breath he hadn't even realized he had been holding. "You're right," \_he muttered to himself. "I talk way too much."

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He'd come too close. She doubted that there was any way that John could have known about Paulto, his offer, and her shameful period of indecision, but his playful analogy had struck too close to home. John had an uncanny way of reaching inside her and exposing her most disquieting thoughts, thoughts she tried hard to bury deep within herself. She wondered if all Earth people were like this. If they were, she'd just as soon that they remain on their side of the universe.

She was tired—"tired of thinking, tired of self-examination, tired of self-recrimination. Exercise was what she needed. Make the body as tired as the mind, until she couldn't think anymore. She headed for the cargo bay she used for that purpose.

Aeryn had set her up her exercise area soon after she joined Moya. She had found an assortment of Peacekeeper martial art and exercise equipment from all over the ship and collected it here, supplementing it once in a while from their many excursions to the various commerce planets. Dominating the room was the oversized mat emblazoned with the red, white, and black Peacekeeper insignia. Her makeshift gym was probably the only place on Moya that she truly felt at home.

She took off her boots and stepped barefoot onto the mat, its familiar feel cool and soothing. Assuming the beginning position for the first Kyde form, she tried to clear her mind and concentrate on her breathing. She began slowly, letting the movements gradually warm her muscles, then picked up the pace. Her breathing increased and as the first sheen of perspiration cooled her skin, she tried to force everything else from her mind intent on letting her muscles assume control of the familiar movements.

She moved from form to form easily. The Kyde forms, with their highly stylized kicks and punches, were basic to building coordination and strength for its sister Oo-kydu style of hand-to-hand combat. She had practiced the forms for as long as she could remember and she valued them not only for the workout they gave her, but for the euphoria created from the perfect focus of mind and body.

By the time she reached the tenth form, she knew that euphoric state would elude her today. Her body knew the movements precisely, yet she struggled continuously to maintain her focus. Flashes of memories nearly forgotten disrupted her concentration.

She had practiced the forms with Paulto more times than she could count. She hadn't thought of him for such a long time, and now she could not seem to remove him from her mind. She imagined him beside her, his movements perfectly synchronized to hers. The tenth form was his favorite. There was a difficult double kick that required perfect balance and timing, and when performed correctly, gave the appearance of defying gravity. He performed the maneuver flawlessly every time and his proud delight had been infectious.

She knew before she even began the second kick in the double that her timing was way off. With both feet in the air, she fell awkwardly on her side to the padded floor. She rolled onto her back and stayed there, breathing heavily. She hadn't fallen in that exercise since she was 12 cycles old, but that wasn't what disturbed her. Her

memories of Paulto were innocent enough. Why did she feel so...guilty?

Her enthusiasm for this exercise session evaporated along with her perspiration. She put her boots back on, wrapped a towel around her shoulders and went back to her quarters. There she found Chiana sifting through the rubble on the floor.

"What are you doing in here?" asked Aeryn sharply. She was in no mood for any dren from Chiana.

Chiana stood up slowly twisting her head to look at Aeryn. "Ahh, don't go gettin' your shivvies in a twist."

Her eyes followed Aeryn's to the piece of rubble she held in her hand. She immediately tossed it to the side. "I don't steal from shipmates. Besides, "she added, a sly smile playing at her lips, "there's nothing here worth snurchin'. I was just...admiring the mess. I didn't think you had it in you."

"I'm so glad you like it," Aeryn said, flatly. "You can leave now."

Chiana, ignored Aeryn's request and began to leisurely wander around the room as she talked, picking up pieces of the rubble here and there, setting things right occasionally, more often just tossing them aside again, but always keeping at least one eye on Aeryn. "I was just thinking, whatâ€"or more likely whoâ€"could have caused you to go all zerker on us? Mother?" She shook her head. "I don't think so. Let's see," she began to tick them off her fingers, "Pilot lives to serve... not him. D'Arrr-go? Um, no. You two have some warrior-buddy thing going on. Rygel? Uh-uh...you would have just squashed the little toad. And I 'know' it's not 'me.'

"So who does that leave? Oh, yes," she said looking back at Aeryn over her shoulder, "Crichton." She grinned, pleased with herself. "Not that I blame youâ€"he's quite the...dish," she added licking her lips.

"Well, then," said Aeryn stiffly, "don't let me stop you. Be my guest."

"Don't think I haven't thought about it. But it's not 'me' he wants."

"I think you'd better leave now, Chiana," Aeryn said more insistently.

Chiana knew better than to push her much farther, but she couldn't resist one parting remark. "It does get very lonely out here sometimes though, doesn't it?" Not expecting an answer, she left, her distant laughter echoing though the corridor.

Irritated, Aeryn turned and stumbled into her quarters, tripping over a misplaced boot. She cursed under her breath and retrieved a waste receptacle from the corner of the room. She needed to clean up her mess and this was as good a time as any.

She worked steadily, beginning at the door and making slow progress across the room sorting the irreparably damaged from the redeemable.

As the broken possessions accumulated in the waste bin she wondered how she had accumulated so many things since she came to Moya. As a soldier all her worldly possessions would fit in one bag and she had left them all behind on Crais's carrier when she fled his death sentence. A soldier needed to travel light. Perhaps it had been time to discard the excess baggage from her life anyway.

She picked up a small box that was overturned on the floor next to her bed. As she lifted it, the damaged lid fell open and two shiny fragments caught her eye as they tumbled to the floor. She bent down to retrieve them holding her breath, hoping she was mistaken, and exhaled with a low moan when she recognized the pieces she held in her hands. She sat heavily on the bed, remembering vividly the first time she had seen it. John had just returned from a trading venture on some commerce planet and had found her in Command. He pushed the thing into her hand saying, "Here, I thought you might like this. It reminded me of you."

She turned the object in her hand. It was oddly cold to the touch with an iridescent metallic sheen although, on closer examination, she could see it was made of ceramic. Fixed on the back was a fastener of some sort. "What is it?"

His eyes went wide for a moment and then narrowed again as he gently smiled. "It's for your hair."

"My hair?" she had said too sternly. She turned it over in her hand again. It did possess a kind of cold beauty, but she was not going to go around wearing some frivolous ornamentation in her hair. She handed it back to him. "I hope you didn't trade much for it. Perhaps they'll take it back."

His smile disappeared as his eyes went wide again, and then hardened with a look of determination. He placed the hair clasp back in the palm of her hand, then curled her fingers around it. "I can see you need lessons in how to accept a gift."

"It is not customary among Peacekeepers to give 'gifts'," she said coldly, "Especially not of a such superficial and non-utilitarian nature."

"Oh, but it is utilitarian." He took the object back and moved around behind her. When she began to turn around to face him, he held her shoulders, commanding her to hold still. She started just for a moment when he first touched her face, but then eased slightly as he drew his fingers lightly along her jaw, up to her ears, and then through her hair, pulling it back. She tried to offer some resistance as he gently tugged and pulled at her hair, but the sensation was extraordinarily relaxing. She closed her eyes.

She opened them again abruptly when he said, "There," and stood back to examine his handiwork. "See? Utilitarian."

She tried to cover up her discomposure by reaching up and feeling the clasp at the back of her head. It did indeed hold her hair securely. She cleared her throat nervously and agreed, "Yes." She began to walk away.

"Wait." He reached out and caught her hand. "Aren't you forgetting something?" He looked at her expectantly.

She looked around her person and could see nothing amiss. "I don't think so."

He laughed. "You really do need lessons, don't you?"

"What?" she said sharply.

"On Earth, we have a little ritual when someone gives a gift." He pulled her closer. "The person that gets the gift usually says something like 'I like it very much' or 'that was very thoughtful of you' and then says 'thank-you'."

Her first inclination was to dismiss his request as just more human nonsense, but she suppressed her irritation. It really was a small thing he asked. She considered a moment before saying, "It will be very useful. Thank-you."

He rewarded her with a smile that unaccountably warmed her to the core. "You're welcome," he said, and he released her hand. This time he didn't stop her when she moved away.

She wore it the rest of the day. Whenever their paths crossed, he noticed, and she could tell—it pleased him, and for some reason she didn't quite understand, that pleased her as well.

As she prepared for sleep that evening, she removed it from her hair. She held it up and examined it again. Purple and pink highlights danced across the surface as she rotated it in the light. He had said, it reminded him of her. It was beautiful.

She put it away that evening and she never worn it again. If he noticed, if he questioned why, he never said.

And now here it was, cracked in two and chipped around the edges. The broken pieces filled her with regret.

She had made a practice of holding him at arm's length. He held such power over her emotions. Her mastery over them sustained her illusions of power and control, when in reality there was little else in her life that she had ever had control of. What did she think she was trying to prove? And to whom?

She looked at the shards in her hand again. The pieces still shimmered pleasingly, but they would never adorn her hair again, an opportunity lost

As with her exercise session, whatever interest or enthusiasm she had had in cleaning up her quarters was gone. She sat on the edge of her bed, clenching the pieces of the hair clasp tightly in her hands. Chiana's parting words came back to her, "...sometimes it gets lonely out here."

She was afraid of being left behind, afraid of being alone, but, at least for the present, she wasn't alone. Perhaps it was time to stop pretending that she was. She dropped the broken pieces into the waste bin.\_ \_

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John spent most of his brief turn in Command wondering when Aeryn would ever speak to him again so he could apologize. Stupid, stupid, stupid,\_ he thought for about the thousandth time. Orbiting the planet offered little diversion from self-disparagement and he was grateful when D'Argo finally relieved him.

He stopped briefly for something to eat and then made a half-hearted attempt to look for Aeryn hoping she'd have had time to cool off. After checking the prowler and her gym, he tried her quarters. She wasn't there, but she had been. The room was noticeably neater although she still had a ways to go. Stopping by his own quarters, he was surprised to find Aeryn sitting on his bed in the dark.

She looked at him, but said nothing. Her eyes followed him as he walked over and sat down next to her, searching for the right words to begin. "You know, that whole thing about Mata Hari, I...I didn't mean to implyâ€œ"

"I know," she cut him off.

He relaxed just a little, but he sensed that there was something more to this, so he waited.

She gazed off into the distance. "When you look at the Peacekeepers, you see the military machine, the abuse of power." She paused for a moment, then continued. "I \_am\_ because of the Peacekeepers. They made me in their image. It is the only family I've ever known. Some of them I care a great deal about."

"They kicked you out of the club."

She shook her head. "Crais did."

John found her hand and held it, playing with her fingers. "Do you think you're a traitor?"

She was silent for a long while before she turned to look at him. "No."

"Then that's really the only thing that counts."

She considered that for a moment. "Did this Mata Hari consider herself a traitor?"

Wishing for the thousandth time that he had never brought this up, he said, "I really don't know Aeryn. I guess soâ€œshe was paid for spying."

Aeryn's eyes widened. "You didn't tell me that part."

"I wish to God I had never brought her up at all."

Her eyes softened and a smile began to play at the corners of her mouth. "I told you, you talk to much."

Feeling at least a little forgiven, he returned the smile. "I thought that was part of my charm." Aeryn raised her eyebrows. "But I guess not. Well, is there anything you do find 'charming' about

me?"

"Right now? That your quarters are," she drew her fingers along the bedside table inspecting the dust, "relatively clean. I hoped you might let me stay here tonight."

John's heart skipped a beat, but he was unsure whether she was actually implying anything or not. "There are spare quarters," he suggested.

"You want me to leave?"

He shook his head, "No."

He picked up her hand again, turning it over. "You took off the bandages." It was more of an observation than a question. He examined the scabs and bruises on the back of her hand, then raised it to his lips. He looked up to see her watching him intently. "Earth medicine...it's supposed to make it feel better."

"I think it's working," she said to him, with a slight smile.

He tilted his head in surprise. The rules of the game were he flirted and she put him down. Of course, there was that moment in the maintenance bay earlier, but then she practically ran away. She was so...confusing. "Aeryn, what's going on?"

"I'm trying to seduce you," she said quite matter-of-factly.

He blinked twice dumb-founded and then began to laugh at her joke, but she wasn't laughing, too. Instead she looked hurt. She got up to leave.

"Whoa, whoa," he said as he caught her by the hand. "Come back here." She sat back down next to him, but wouldn't look at him. "What's this all about? Maybe we should talk about it."

"I-I don't know how humans do it," she said apologetically, keeping her eyes on her lap.

"Well, maybe we shouldn't worry about how humans do it, or Sebaceans for that matter. Maybe we should just worry about how 'we' do it." He ducked his head down in her line of sight, forcing her to look him in the eyes. "Whadaya think?" She smiled at him uncertainly.

Now that he had her attention, he wasn't sure where to begin. "Well, this morning we got pretty close, but it seemed to upset you. Why the big change?"

"I'm...lonely."

He shook his head. "Not good enough."

She sighed deeply and when she began again she spoke slowly as if she were carefully selecting each word. "I've felt an attraction for you for some time now. I always thought that to act on that attraction would just make things too complicated on Moya, but I've reconsidered and now I'm willing to take that risk."

Would wonders never cease? Aeryn Sun was practically admitting that she was in love with him, or as close as she could come. He smiled at her in approval and leaned closer to her, running the backs of his fingertips along her arm. "Well, things are bound to get complicated. I just didn't want you to think that I was 'easy'."

"John, absolutely nothing about you is easy," she said with conviction, then added more softly, "You know, I'm not given to all this introspective dren." She, too, leaned closer, turning to face him.

"No," he stiffened momentarily as her hand touched his thigh. "You're more a 'frontal assault, take-no-prisoners' kinda gal." She was close enough he could feel her moist breath on his face. The fine hairs on the back of his neck stood at attention.

"Then you understand me well." She leaned forward just ever so slightly more and their mouths connected. She kissed him hard, nothing shy or hesitant about it, full of promise. Maybe things would get complicated, but he, too, was more than willing to take that risk.

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### 3. Deception

> <meta name="Generator"> Change of Heart (Part 3-Deception)  
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Change of Heart (Part 3-Deception)

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Author: Brenda, ScribLL@houston.rr.com

Part: 3/5

Rating: PG-13

Summary: Appearances can be deceiving. This is set about a month after 'A Bug's Life, Aeryn got better all on her own and Crais is still captain of his command carrier so obviously this has become an AH since my first draft.

Disclaimer: I don't own anything about Farscape. All characters, except the few I created, belong to Henson studios and the SciFi Channel.

With many, many thanks to Kat for her encouragement, invaluable advice, and for reeling me back in when I get over my head.

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Deception

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John was awakened by a high-pitched chirp he dimly recognized as his

comm signal. He opened his eyes, abruptly recalling the night before. It didn't take much of a check to realize that he was alone. He reached over to his comm badge on the nightstand. "Yeah, Pilot?"

"\_John Crichton, I'm sorry to wake you, but your rendezvous with Prater Delmar is in nearly an arn\_."

An arn? "I'll be there right away. Thanks for the wake-up call."

"\_Of course.\_"

John had slept a happy and satisfied man and he had no idea when Aeryn had left. He was disappointed, but not surprised to find her gone. Two steps forward, one step backâ€"this delicate dance that seemed to define their relationship. He had hoped that after last night, they had moved beyond that once and for all. She had come to him and revealed the warm, passionate woman she guarded so carefully. He wondered once more what had happened to her to make her like this, one more reason to despise the Peacekeepers.

He reminded himself that he had a role to play and got up to find the Peacekeeper captain's uniform he had put away a month ago. As he put it on he tried not to think about the Peacekeeper lieutenant he had brutally killed, not that he really remembered killing herâ€"the intel-virus had done that. Still, the guilt remained. He examined himself in the mirror. Poofâ€"instant Peacekeeper, he thought morbidly. He stretched his neck from side to side and rolled his shoulders attempting to dispel his rising anxiety. It was time to find Aeryn.

He made a quick stop in the center chamber for a handful of food cubes and took them with him to Command. Aeryn was already there, her hair tied back, dressed in her lieutenant's uniform. With her stood D'Argo and Rygel as they conferred with Pilot. As he joined them, Aeryn's eyes locked on his, but she remained expressionless.

"It's about time you joined us," growled D'Argo.

"Sorry, I was just sleeping so soundly," John answered, his eyes remaining on Aeryn. "And how did you sleep?" he asked in mock challenge.

She answered without hesitation. "I slept very well."

D'Argo looked at them both for a moment, a fleeting question in his expression that changed to irritation. "I'm glad you both slept well," he said sarcastically. "Do you think we can get on with the business at hand?"

"Relax, D'Argo," said John, attempting to mollify him.

"I won't relax until we leave this place. Now it's been five days since we found the last wanted beacon. I'm surprised bounty hunters haven't found us."

"Just a few more arns," said Rygel.

"Will Moya be ready to starburst as soon as they return?" D'Argo

asked Pilot.

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"Moya is ready to starburst now, Ka D'Argo," said the 3D projection of Pilot in the shell viewer. "I've downloaded the coordinates given to your prowler, Officer Sun. They are in a city on the southern continent. You'll have to land just outside and proceed on foot about half a metra into the city. I've downloaded those vectors, too. You should have no trouble locating the rendezvous point."

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"Right," Aeryn acknowledged and then turned to Rygel. "Come with us to the transport bay. You can tell us anything else we may need to know about Prater Delmar." She strode off, but paused at the door asking over her shoulder, "Coming, Captain Bond?"

John smiled at her joke, nodding his head to her in appreciation, but thought it best to forget any Mata Hari comebacks. "Right behind you, 'Lef-tenant' Sun."

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He sat behind her in the prowler as she methodically went through the preflight systems check. As much as he wanted to talk to her, he knew better than try to interrupt her now. He wanted to know how she felt. He wanted to know if she had any regrets or reservations about what had happened between them. And most of all he wanted to assuage any doubts she might have, but so far she seemed to be studiously avoiding the subject, and so, for the time being, he was willing to follow her lead. He knew that she was probably having a hard time accepting the change in their relationship; this was all so new to her. Of course, it was new to him, too. He'd never had sex with an alien before. Sex with an Alien. It sounded like the name of a cocktail. What would it have in it? Gin? No, tequila. And something sweet like orange juice, with a touch of bitters. He began to chuckle to himself.

"What are you doing back there?" asked Aeryn, irritated. Well, that was familiar.

"Sorry," he said, suppressing his amusement. "Free associating."

She gave him a sharp glance over her shoulder. "Maybe we should go over a few Peacekeeper protocols before we get down to the planet."

"Right, back to business."

Aeryn wasted no time and they were launched moments later. They spent the short flight reviewing the most common Peacekeeper protocols, just in case their mark had some familiarity with them.

The coordinates landed them just outside a small settlement on the southern continent very soon after the local sunrise. The blue morning light threw the dark, steep-pitched roofs into stark relief against the violet sky. The buildings were mostly two- or three-stories set close to the street reminding John vaguely of some quaint European village and he wondered if there was a reason this

place had been selected over the many more modern cities on the planet, although he knew appearances were often deceptive.

As they followed the directions Pilot had given them, the streets became narrower casting deepening shadows in the early morning light. Their path kept them walking mostly uphill and the many twists and turns were disorientating. Listening to their footsteps echo through the nearly empty streets, John began to get a very uneasy feeling. Aeryn, too, seemed nervous, looking around as if she were expecting something. It didn't take Aeryn's tactical training to see that they were at a disadvantage.

"Are you sure you're following the directions?" asked John.

"Yes, I've checked the vectors twice. Look," she said nodding towards the road, "the road must open up ahead. You can see direct sunlight."

"Maybe we should check with Pilot." John paused to open the lapel of his jacket to expose his comm as Aeryn continued ahead several paces.

With precision timing four armed Peacekeepers erupted from the opening ahead and at the same time more troops emerged from the buildings around them. They were surrounded in seconds. "It's a trap!" Peacekeepers!" John yelled into his comm before the nearest Peacekeeper knocked him to the ground with the butt of his rifle. He shook his head to clear it and found himself staring into the business end of at least four pulse rifles. He looked over at Aeryn expecting her to be in full commando mode attempting to punch her way out of the unexpected attack. Instead she stood stock-still staring straight ahead at the Peacekeeper walking towards her and it dawned on John that she recognized him. He heard the officer say, "Welcome back, Aeryn," before embracing her in greeting. The officers next to John took hold of each arm and proceeded to bind his hands behind his back with some equivalent of handcuffs, but he had ceased resisting. He stared at Aeryn as she stood aside to let the officer that hugged her approach him, looking him over carefully.

"This is Crichton?" the Peacekeeper asked over his shoulder.

Aeryn's voice sounded dry as she answered, "Yes."

The Peacekeeper turned around and began walking in the opposite direction, obviously expecting everyone else to follow. As he walked away, John could hear his words clearly. "Good work, Officer Sun."

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Aeryn fell in with the troops as they began their march. Crichton was somewhere behind her with his armed escort. She glanced back once when they started out to assure herself that he was all right. Her relief that he appeared uninjured vanished under his withering stare and she quickly turned away. She could easily imagine what was going through his mind. She did not look back at him again, afraid that her emotions would betray her.

The whole set up had been too good to be true—"Peacekeeper map fibers for a few crates of distillate? But the promised bait was

good, too good for them to pass up. Paulto had chosen well. And then there was that promenade through the narrow streets. The rawest grot would have seen through that set up. Frell, even Crichton knew something was wrong. They should have gone back to the prowler and left immediately.

All the clues, all the warning signs—she should have known. And that was the nagging thought that tugged at her conscience—despite all her suspicions, she led John into the trap anyway.

She had to admire the efficiency with which the Peacekeepers sprang the trap. They were completely surrounded in the space of a few microts. She had had her pulse gun ready; she probably could have gotten off a couple of rounds, but she held her fire. She had told herself that John as well as herself would have been killed in the return fire, and that she did not want John to die for her mistake, but now she wondered if that was the only reason.

The only real surprise in the attack had been Paulto. Not that he was there—it hadn't taken her two microts to put that together. No, the surprise had been when he whispered to her, "They think you helped me capture him. If you're smart, you'll play along." He spoke so softly, the suggestion so preposterous, she could scarcely trust her own ears. He could have easily pulled this off over her dead body, but Paulto was trying to save her. If the result weren't so disastrous, it would really be very touching, not very Peacekeeper-like at all. But at that moment she knew that her only hope of saving John was to go along with Paulto's scheme. She could only too easily imagine what this must look like to John. She tried not to wince.

The procession wasted no time as it made its way through the narrow streets. The few townspeople that they came upon either ran away or cowered in their doorways, but none dared interfere with the heavily armed Peacekeeper force. She searched for an opportunity to escape, knowing how much harder it would be once they were underway, but they were too closely guarded, and hopelessly outnumbered, and with John bound, any attempt would have surely ended in his death. Despite the many twists and turns, Aeryn could tell that they were generally making their way to the north. In less than half an arn they came to the edge of the city and the road led them to the top of a rise. As they approached the edge, Aeryn caught sight of their vessel for the first time. The familiar symbols marked it as Peacekeeper, but she had never seen such a ship before. It was generally elliptical in shape, but with hugely oversized plasma jets. Aeryn estimated her mass at something like 30 sakmar, about twenty times the size of a marauder. It might barely fit in Moya's transport bay, but it would never get through the door.

They entered through a starboard airlock. Paulto pulled Aeryn aside for a moment and they let the rest of the compliment pass. As John passed them, he shot Aeryn a look, and for her life, and her honor—whatever that was worth—she'd never felt so guilty in her entire life. She'd betrayed him. And he knew it.

"Where are they taking him?" she asked Paulto.

"To a holding cell on deck two. Follow me," he said as he entered a corridor to their left. Aeryn watched John's back until he disappeared and then turned to follow Paulto. After getting used to the comparative spaciousness of Moya, the low ceilings gave her a

feeling of claustrophobia that only added to her growing unease.

Paulto checked two open cabins before he entered a third. He stood aside to allow Aeryn to enter the empty room and then he shut the door behind them.

She turned on him immediately. "Just what the frell do you think you're doing?"

"I'm saving you. I 'know' you want to come back, but you seem to have some misguided loyalty to this Crichton, so I thought it best to change the plan a bit. You'll come to see that this is for the best."

"Of course, it doesn't hurt you either."

"No," he admitted. "My rank has been restoredâ€"I may even finally get that promotion. You may too, if you keep your mouth shut and stick to the story."

She turned away from him fighting the urge to cram his words back down his throat. She breathed deeply to calm herself. "I owe John...a lot," she said turning back around. She shook her head. "I can't do this to him."

"Well, 'you' don't have to. I did it for you." He smiled. "What are 'mates' for?" His smile faded at Aeryn's forbidding scowl. "You may not appreciate it now, but you will eventually. That or you'll be joining your friend. And a fat lot of good that will do either of you. I come out alright either way so you choose." He moved over to the door. "The captain wanted to see you as soon as we came on board. We better go."

Aeryn struggled to get her anger under control as she followed Paulto to the bridge. It would do no good for her to be locked up with John. As a member of the crew, she would have a certain freedom of access. She might be able to find some way for them to get out of this.

The crowded bridge was alive with sound and movement as the crew made preparations for departure. They both snapped to attention as the captain approached them. Even without his uniform, Aeryn would have recognized him as the captain. Though only of medium build his bearing made him seem much larger and he walked around the bridge as if he owned it, which of course, he did. He reminded her of Crais.

"Captain Taxus, Officer Jetaal reporting," said Paulto formally.

"At ease. I take it everything went as planned."

"Yes, the Human, Crichton, is being secured in the holding cell on deck two."

"Excellent, Jetaal. You are to be commended. And this must be Officer Sun."

"Yes, sir," she said, still at attention. She didn't like the way he walked around her, looking her over as if she were some sort of

curious alien oddity, even though it was certainly his right.

"Officer Jetaal says that he would not have succeeded without your help."

"He's too generous, sir."

"That may still prove to be the case. Captain Crais may have pronounced you irreversibly contaminated a bit prematurely, but since then you've been with the escaped prisoners a long time."

"I believe she's more than proved her loyalty, sir," Paulto interjected.

"Yes, I'm quite aware of your opinion, Officer Jetaal," the captain said, not taking his eyes away from Aeryn. "You've been given an extraordinary opportunity, Officer Sun. After such a sentence, it is rare enough to have one's life spared, let alone have their career rectified. First Command has been quite generous, possibly, too generous. If I were you, I would take close care in the future to comport myself to the highest Peacekeeper standards. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, sir." The implied threat was all too clear; she would have to be very careful.

"Officer Greffen," he said over his shoulder to his aide, "Please find Officer Sun some quarters and show her her assigned duty station for the remainder of this journey. And please, get her a proper uniform. She shouldn't get to wear a lieutenant's attire until she's earned it."

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John was taken up several flights of narrow metal stairs, down another corridor and then into a windowless room with a barred cell. While one Peacekeeper stood guard outside, the other pushed John into the cell and released the bindings on his hands. He then backed out and keyed a code into a control panel on the wall. The barred gate closed with only a whisper and John was alone.

He unconsciously rubbed his wrists and then sat down slowly on a bench projecting from the wall. He gave no notice when the ship heaved slightly as it took off, as he tried to absorb the meaning of exactly what had happened. Aeryn had betrayed him, given him up to the enemy. And for it, she was getting back into her beloved Peacekeeper club. There was just no other way to rationalize it. No other explanation. The pain of her betrayal cut deep, beyond the fear of death. This obviously was not some spur of the moment decision; she had planned this. Even as she came to him in his bed, she had known that she would do this. How in God's name could she do this? He knew his failing was that he judged everyone by Human standards. He had made that mistake time and time again, but he knew this time the lesson would never be taught as well. He had been ready to declare his 'undying love' for her and she was planning how to use him as a pawn in her Peacekeeper games. "How do say 'sucker' in Sebacean?"

He had no way of knowing how much time had passed before Aeryn came

to stand outside the door to his cell.

"Are you alright, John?" she asked.

"You really are a cold-blooded bitch, aren't you?" he said, pleased with the distressed expression on her face, pleased that he had any power at all to hurt her.

"They're not taking you to Crais."

"Does it really matter?"

"You're being taken to First Command. Crais is in serious trouble with the Council. He has been disobeying direct orders to return to Peacekeeper territory in his quest to find you. Once Crais finds out that you are at First Command, he'll return and they will deal with him. You'll be rid of Crais for once and all. He'll never be able to threaten you again. They'll let you go then."

"And you get to go home and be the proud Peacekeeper again. How very convenient for you."

"I'm truly sorry, John."

"Mata Hari had nothin' on you. Will D'Argo and Zhaan be joining me?"

"No, the Leviathan escaped."

Aeryn continued to stare, her eyes seemed to be pleading with him. What did she expect from him? Forgiveness? Thanks for getting Crais off his tail? \_Not in a million years, babe\*\*.\*\_

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At last she lowered her eyes. She took a step backward, as if to leave, but he couldn't let her get away that easy. "You didn't have to fuck me. I would have come anyway." Sound made solid, he watched the blow connect. \_Definitely above and beyond the call of duty. Do you get a promotion for that? Or at least maybe a medal?" She turned and left.

In that moment before she fled, just a second really, the horrible pained expression on her faceâ€”John regretted his words. \_Sorry, I'm so sorry...it'll be all right\_. But the moment passed.

You always were a chump, he admonished himself.

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Aeryn stumbled half-blind out of the holding cell, fighting the wetness that welled at her eyes. A crewman walked past her in the corridor and she turned away, leaning against the wall in a vain attempt to hide her face. If he noticed, he gave no sign and passed by. She took the first turn into an empty alcove and pressed herself into the corner, wiping her face with her sleeve.

She had had to check on him, had to make sure that he was all right, and hopefully explain how this had happened. Spotting the camera in corner, she realized that his cell was being monitored. She couldn't

take a chance of revealing that she was not part of the whole scheme, so she stuck with the official line, hoping that at least he might think that things were not as bad as they looked. She could hardly be surprised by John's vehemence. She'd had no doubt that he believed that she had betrayed him, and she could hardly blame his reaction, still it had hurt her more than she believed possible.

She had heard him say that human word before—"once when he had dropped a half-full barrel of chakken oil on his foot and another time when she had kicked him in the chest harder than she had intended during a shared combat drill"—but it had never occurred to her to ask what it meant. She had no doubt what 'fuck' meant now.

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How could things have gone so wrong?

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I should have talked to him this morning, she thought. He wanted to, she knew it, but she busied herself with preparing the prowler and then went on and on about Peacekeeper protocols, anything, anything to avoid talking about what was going on inside her, to avoid telling him how close to her heart he was, how much he meant to her. And now it was too late. He believed she had sex with him just to gain his confidence.

This doesn't do John any good, she scolded herself. Calling up years of Peacekeeper training, she forced her feelings into submission, but refused to dismiss them. She savored the dull ache in pit of her stomach, a fit punishment for her crime of omission, a welcome companion to her purpose. She checked her appearance in the sheen of the metallic wall. Wiping her eyes once more, she set her Peacekeeper mask in place knowing it was necessary, but for the first time, despising it all the same.

4.

Calvalry